

Air traffic control (ATC) modernization is an enormously difficult and complex task. Some have compared the effort to changing the tires on a car while it is traveling at 60 miles per hour down the freeway. It involves upgrading the equipment and procedures that manage the flow of aircraft across the nation without disrupting that flow. It is somewhat understandable, therefore, that the FAA has had difficulties with many of these programs.

Although the magnitude of these difficulties have been troubling for those of us in Congress who oversee the FAA, we are not here this morning to belabor the problems of the past. Instead, we are here to learn where the modernization effort stands today and where it is going in the future.

The FAA must learn, nevertheless, from the missteps of the past as it tries to improve the ATC system and take it where it has never been before. We are no longer simply talking about replacing an outdated and outmoded infrastructure with new equipment. With the advent of satellite-based navigation and Free Flight, we are talking about a whole new way of operating and thinking for the FAA.

While the new paradigms for the ATC system offer great promise, they also pose great risks. The FAA has been chided in the past for making plans that exceed its capabilities when it comes to modernization programs. That is why there remain questions as to whether it has the wherewithal to transition the entire ATC system to a new type of infrastructure for navigation and a new approach to handling air traffic. Being able to think “outside the box” will become a valuable asset as this effort progresses.

The current plans for modernization mean big changes for users of the ATC system as well as the FAA and its employees. Cooperation and coordination are essential because each relies upon the other. There is little point in one side making costly and time-consuming investments if they do not mesh with the investments of the other.

It is good to know that the FAA and industry have been working more closely in recent months as the agency charts a new course for the ATC system. The aviation community must play a role in the decisions that will affect it. Everyone seems to agree that the capacity and the efficiency of the

current system are reaching their limits, and this is the case even taking into consideration the scheduled installation of new equipment at every air traffic control facility. If growing ATC delays cause the hub-and-spoke systems of the major airlines to become unmanageable, the entire nation will pay the price. The Northwest Airlines strike of last year and the American Airlines pilot troubles this year had dramatic impacts on millions of Americans. Those types of inconveniences and delays will become commonplace if the FAA and the users falter in the modernization effort.

Congress plays a role in this effort as well. Beyond our important oversight role, we have a responsibility to ensure that the FAA has the resources and tools to accomplish its mission. But this can be a difficult task because we also have a responsibility to be fiscally responsible with the entire federal budget. I urge our witnesses to let us know what Congress can do to assist in the modernization effort. Given the stakes involved, the safety, capacity, and efficiency of the national air transportation system must be a top national priority.

I thank each of our witnesses for being here and look forward to discussing this critical issue.